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7 December 1995

DECEMBER 7, 1945

I'm writing this, I notice, on December 7, 1995. I know, of course, like anyone my age or older, what I was doing on this day 54 years ago. We were driving in the countryside, Mother, Gloria and I, Dad at the wheel of the green Plymouth, driving slowly on country roads through farmland outside Detroit. I was sitting next to my father, listening to the Sunday afternoon live symphony program on the car radio. That was the way we spent a sunny Sunday afternoon then, aimlessly driving for fun, in those days before the war. It was called "pleasure driving" then, and it actually was. It's hard to imagine such a notion now, or someone saying "Let's go for a drive."

That was one of the things that changed for good that day. Before long gas rationing ended pleasure driving, and then later suburbs and highways filled with cars covered the countryside and we didn't explore back roads anymore.

Who was alive then who can forget what they were doing those last minutes before the war, and how they heard the news? Well, George Bush, for one, maybe the only one ever. He managed to get the date wrong in a speech to American veterans, of all people. It was on September 7, I believe, and he began his speech by commenting that it was the anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

If Ronald Reagan had said that as President, Bush might have replaced him sooner than he did. It would have been taken as conclusive confirmation of Reagan's mental incompetence. I've never understood how the media and the Democrats let Bush off the hook on this, without even making much out of it. It may be that they simply couldn't cope with it, couldn't even acknowledge how shocking it was. It was just off the scope.

Probably no one much younger than I am can really appreciate that. If you were born long after 1931, when I was, you probably think I'm making too much of this. If you are older, you know I'm not. Presumably that's how Bush got away with it. Most journalists and most of their readers are younger than that.

They were probably more struck by his vomiting on the Japanese prime minister.

I tried to explain to my younger son how deeply disturbing, and at the same time incomprehensible, it was that someone older than me would forget the date of Pearl Harbor Day. "It's like someone getting the date wrong for Christmas, or the Fourth of July."

December 7, '41, was the day that everything changed, for all of us. (The Fourth of July, five years later, was the day that everything changed for me). I remember the announcer's voice,

breaking into the live symphony performance, telling us that Japanese planes had attacked Pearl Harbor. I don't think I had ever heard of Pearl Harbor before. I had certainly never heard of American ships being attacked. We turned around and went home, and I rushed to the phone to tell my friend Myron Poe, hoping he hadn't heard the news so I could be the one to tell him. He hadn't, and I did.

I still remember the pleasure and excitement of that. It was the first time I had been able to bring really big news to someone. In fact, looking back on it, I never had anything that big to tell again. No, that's wrong. There was a time over twenty years later when I knew far ahead of most of the country that we were going to war. And even before that I knew that a Pearl Harbor-like attack on American ships that the President had just announced on national television probably hadn't happened at all. But then I wasn't supposed to tell anyone who didn't already know these things, and, I'm sorry to say, I didn't.